

The background of the cover is a photograph of a carpeted hallway leading to a glass entrance. The carpet features a large, light-colored Golden Nugget logo, which includes the word 'GOLDEN' in a stylized font and a large 'N' with a nugget shape inside. A person is visible in the distance at the end of the hallway.

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

April | May 2025
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SKIN IN THE GAME

Entering its third year in business, the Golden Nugget Danville casino is shifting its focus to guest, community engagement

From the editor's desk



Spring is upon us, the weather has turned warmer and brighter, and in the world of this magazine, that can only mean one thing: It's time to start gathering nominees for the Forty Under 40 Class of 2025.

The process begins with people like you heading to news-gazette.com and clicking on the nominations form, which will be available until July 25.

Once nominations close, our expert panel of judges will choose the winners based on achievement, experience, innovation, leadership and community involvement. Among them will be the 2025 Man and Woman of the Year.

We'll wrap it all up with a banquet honoring the Class of 2025 in October.

This is the 18th year for our annual event, which was launched in 2007 and gets more impressive with each new class.

So get those nominations in and let's celebrate the young difference-makers who power our community.

—Niko

Niko Dugan is the Managing Editor of The News-Gazette. Reach him by email at ndugan@news-gazette.com or by phone at 217-393-8253.

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A patron waits under the portico at the entrance to the Golden Nugget Danville casino at 204 Eastgate Drive on the city's east side. Photo by Robin Scholz

CENTRAL ILLINOIS
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centralillinoisbusiness.com

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER

Paul M. Barrett
pmbpub@aol.com

VICE PRESIDENT OF ADVERTISING

Mark Lukas
217-393-8238
mlukas@news-gazette.com

EDITOR

Niko Dugan
217-393-8253
ndugan@news-gazette.com

CONTENT DIRECTOR

Jim Rossow
217-393-8261
jrossow@news-gazette.com

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TOP LAWYERS

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA AREA

BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



These **LEADING LAWYERS** have been recommended by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois.

Delmar K. Banner	Banner Ford LLP	Champaign	217.353.4900	Agriculture; Close/Private Held Bus; RE: Commercial; RE: Finance; Trust/Will/Estate
James D. Cottrell	James D Cottrell Law Office PC	Champaign	217.693.4905	Agriculture; Close/Private Held; Land Use/Zoning; RE: Commercial; Trust/Will/Estate
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1520	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Richard P. Klaus	Klaus LeFebvre & Wince LLP	Champaign	217.337.4700	Civil Appellate; Commercial Lit; PI Def: General; Prof'l Malpractice Def; RE: Comm
Thomas B. Borton	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Kevin M. Toth	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Joseph R. Wetzel	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Def: General
Nicholas M. Schiro	Schiro & Themer	Danville	217.443.1721	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Rowan E. Themer	Schiro & Themer	Champaign	217.607.0750	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
William A. Peithmann	The Peithmann Law Office	Mahomet	217.586.6102	Agriculture; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Tax: Individual; Trust/Will/Estate
Denise Knipp Bates	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Elder; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Justin N. Brunner	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Rights/Constitution; Gov/Muni/Lobby/Admin; Medical Mal Def; PI Def: General
Eric S. Chovanec	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Close/Private Held; Employment: Management; Labor: Managmnt; Work Comp Def
James D. Green	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Insurance/Insurance Coverage/Reinsurance; Personal Injury Defense: General
Richard R. Harden	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Defense: General
Nathan T. Kolb	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Insur/Ins Coverage/Reins; Medical Malpractice Def; PI Def: General
Kenneth D. Reifsteck	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Workers' Compensation Defense
Nathaniel M. Schmitz	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Close/Private Held Business; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
John M. Sturmanis	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Workers' Compensation Defense
Lott H. Thomas	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Trust/Will/Estate
John T. Wozniak	Wozniak & Associates	Urbana	217.367.1647	Close/Private Held Business; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate

These **EMERGING LAWYERS** have been identified by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois who are age 40 or younger OR who have been admitted to the practice of law for 10 or fewer years.

Gina Couri-Cyphers	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Civil Appellate; Personal Injury: General
Philip J. Pence	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Employment: Management

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JEN WAGNER

STORY Jeff D'Alessio

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

Once upon a time, as her mom reminded her, **JEN WAGNER** was the young fashionista who'd change outfits three, four, sometimes five times a day. So her second career — running a business with “boutique” in the title — made perfect sense.

And eight years later, it still does, says the owner of Mahomet's Whisk Coffee and Wine Bar/ En Route Boutique, who gets a kick out of “the impact on women's confidence” her work can have.

“I had a lady concerned about finding the right outfit for an important event and she finally found a dress that when she tried it on, you could tell her confidence changed,” she says. “She wore it to the event and had to drive all the way back to Mahomet from Peoria just to tell me how many compliments she had received and how amazing she felt that day.”

A Mahomet resident who attended Holy Cross, Urbana High and the University of Illinois, Wagner found a way to combine two of her passions — coffee and fashion — into a successful and unique small business.

The mother of four and grandmother of one took time out to answer questions from Editor Jeff D'Alessio in the 269th installment of our weekly speed read spotlighting leaders of organizations big and small.



I can't live without my ... granddaughter. There is just something so special about having grandkids.

My one unbreakable rule of the workplace is ... quality and consistency. If you won't serve it to me, don't serve it to customers.

My philosophy on meetings is ... that they are only useful if they stay focused and productive. I believe in keeping them concise, no more than 20 minutes, so that everyone stays engaged and focused on the objectives.

Efficient discussion points and actionable takeaways are key to make the meetings worthwhile.

The hardest thing about being a leader is ... managing so many different personalities and needs while juggling multiple responsibilities.

Leadership requires the adaptability to know when to support, when to challenge and how to balance the many hats you have to wear.

It is a constant effort to keep things running smoothly while ensuring everyone feels heard and valued.

The three adjectives I hope my staff would use to describe me are ... focused, supportive and driven.

On my office walls, you'll find ... a newspaper article, my first En Route sign, sticky notes with business goals

and a to-do list.

I'm frugal in that ... I compare prices before making purchases, and if this means going to multiple stores to save, I will.

I am always looking for cost-effective solutions without sacrificing quality. I have spreadsheets that compare prices for all my go-to products.

If I could trade places for a week with any other business person in town, I wouldn't mind switching with ... a UI marketing/advertising professor. Marketing and advertising are a passion of mine, and I love seeing how people are influenced by creative strategies.

It would be fascinating to dive into that world and learn from someone who is shaping the next generation of advertisers/marketers.

The single-most important question I ask job candidates during interviews is ... give me an example of a time you demonstrated being a true team player.

I'm up and at 'em every day by ... 5 a.m.

The first thing I do when I get to work most days is ... make myself a latte.

When it comes to winding down after work ... currently, I don't have a lot of wind-down time but love to get into my PJs and watch a good movie or TV series.

The last luxury in which I indulged was ... good food, fine wine and cocktails.

The most beneficial college class I took ... has to have been Professor Tiffany White's marketing class at the University of Illinois. She always brought real-world situations into the classroom.

For lunch ... most days, I skip because my days usually get away from me and I don't stop to eat.

As far as my exercise routine goes ... in the last four years, my exercise routine has not been a routine.

The first job I ever had was ... babysitting. I started at 9 years old.

I knew this is what I wanted to do for a living when ... I made a career change eight years ago. It wasn't something I had ever done before, but I love a good challenge and I believed in the concept.

Looking back, maybe it was meant to be — I used to change my clothes five times a day when I was younger.

When my mom came into the store the first time and saw me changing my outfits and taking pictures, she said: "You have found the perfect career; you have been doing this since you were little, taking pictures and changing your clothes all day long."

More than just picking clothes, I love being able to boost women's confidence through what they wear. Fashion is such an important part of daily life — it's not just about style, but about how you feel in your own skin.

The right outfit can change a someone's mood, elevate their confidence and empower someone to take on their day with a whole new mindset.

Plus, I've always loved finding solutions to people's challenges, which makes this job even more fulfilling. ✂

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Labor of love

Do-it-all cleaning and lawn-care firm a product of owner's strong work ethic

Happy Green Services owner Rich Lustfeldt can frequently be seen behind the controls at his company's many job sites.



STORY William David Higgs III **PHOTOS** Provided

Happy Green Services is hard to miss. Its bright-green logo can be seen on commercial and residential properties throughout Champaign-Urbana, where one is likely to see owner Rich Lustfeldt hard at work alongside his crew of trained cleaning and lawn-care professionals.

"The reason why I called it Happy

Green Services was because I didn't want to just be known as a cleaning company," Lustfeldt says. "I looked at business names and nothing was even close to that. I wanted the name to stand out."

Lustfeldt worked a number of jobs before launching Happy Green Services in 2016. Although he enjoyed career success early on, he says his ultimate goal was always to own his own business.



He drafted the business plan on an overnight trip while working as a marketer for Jimmy John's.

"I was just in the hotel working out, and I started working on a business plan," Lustfeldt says. "It sounds kind of cheesy, but it really just started to flow out of me. The name, the colors, what I was going to do."

"I always thought in the back of my head that I was going to start a business of my own," he adds. "I knew that was going to be my trajectory for a couple of reasons, mostly work ethic. My work ethic has just always been stronger than others."

Happy Green Services began as an indoor cleaning service. Lustfeldt says although the operation was simple, he

prided himself on the quality of service he offered.

"There were many reasons why the cleaning was the first service I offered," he says. "Number one, I've always been a neat freak all my life. Second thing, I wanted to implement something where I could work in the wintertime because if you're not landscaping or mowing, you're not making money."

Happy Green Services quickly expanded from basic cleaning to more involved services like property disposal. As it grew its clientele of residential and commercial properties, Lustfeldt expanded to lawn care and landscaping. Before long, Lustfeldt was offering mowing, landscaping, lawn maintenance and weed control.

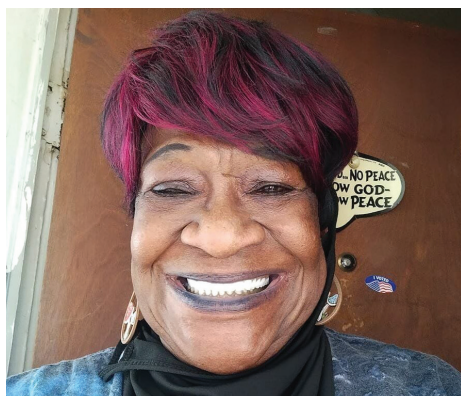
Happy Green Services' website says customers trust it to give them "the best lawn in town." In addition to lawn care and cleaning, it also provides rapid-response snow removal and salting services.

"Pretty much every kind of cleaning you can have done on your property, we do," Lustfeldt says. "We even offer our own cleaning product, Happy Green Naturals. It's on the website."

The line of environmentally friendly cleaners are produced locally. Customers can select cleaning fluids for a variety of indoor and outdoor surfaces, including granite and tile. Lustfeldt encourages customers to consider Happy Green Services for all of their cleaning needs. 

FIVE WHO'VE THRIVED

Introducing the 2025 recipients of Experience Champaign-Urbana's Brilliant Spirit Awards (formerly Tourism Impact Awards), who'll be saluted during the annual Toast To Tourism celebration, set for May 7 at the Hilton Garden Inn:



RUTHIE HARPER
ION Grove Café

She's the "vibrant personality" greeting passengers at Willard Airport's new on-site cafe. Added Harper's nominator, airport Executive Director Tim Bannon: "Her commitment to service is contagious, and impacts staff around her, elevating the standards of the airport. She's sure to put a smile on your face after each interaction."



IRENE MACEDO HERNANDEZ
La Paloma Food Truck

Take it from her employees, who nominated the mother of three as a group: Hernandez is "very passionate at what she does at the food truck and takes care of customers with great and positive energy." Her seven-year, Champaign-based business serves home-style Mexican food and caters events around the area, from Mahomet to Monticello.



LAURA RANEY
Comfort Suites Urbana

The Urbana hotel sales manager's star shines brightest in March, when the IHSA boys' basketball finals roll into town, her nominator wrote. Raney "put the needs of the guests ahead of the policies of the hotel" when a school making its first trip to state last month discovered upon arrival that the IHSA doesn't cover teams' hotel bills.



JAN SEELEY
Christie Clinic Illinois Marathon

The do-it-all director, promoter, problem solver, route planner, volunteer recruiter and face behind what her nominator called "one of the most anticipated weekends in Champaign County's annual calendar" — race weekend, scheduled this year for April 24-26. The year-round effort can be "like planning a Super Bowl," Seeley says.



JOHN STEPHENS
Little Theatre on the Square

He's the executive producer of the 68-year-old Moultrie County "cultural cornerstone," which "has brought Broadway-quality performances to our community, enriching lives through the arts," Stephens' nominator wrote. Among the A-listers who've graced the Sullivan stage over the years: Alan Alda, Ruth Warrick and Mickey Rooney.



By LAURA WEIS
CIB contributor

Fostering civics-minded students

Are you smarter than a middle-schooler? Let's find out. Answer the following (no cheating; answers at the end of this column):

1. What is required for Congress to override a presidential veto?

- A) A simple majority vote in both the House and Senate
- B) A two-thirds majority vote in both the House and Senate
- C) A unanimous vote in the Senate only
- D) Approval from the Supreme Court

2. The Federalist Papers were written to support the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Who was NOT one of the authors?

- A) Alexander Hamilton
- B) James Madison
- C) John Adams
- D) John Jay

On April 5, we were all abuzz hosting the first-ever local round of the U.S. National Civics Bee for middle-schoolers. Fifteen area middle school students competed to show off their knowledge of the history, rules, processes and procedures our country is founded on and that continue to make our government work. The questions you just answered are a sample of the 20 questions posed to the students.

In 2022, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's National Civics Bee launched this nonpartisan competition to encourage young Americans to engage in civics and contribute to their communities. In 2024, the foundation held the inaugural championship in Washington, D.C., to promote civic engagement by increasing civic knowledge, skills and participation among middle-schoolers.

The foundation also hopes this competition empowers future leaders through the bee. The goal of empowering the students is for them to become informed and active citizens and foster their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.

This was our primary driver for becoming a local partner in the bee. As we often say with our "iRead, iCount" program, we cannot wait for students to graduate from



The three finalists in the Champaign County division of the National Civics Bee, all from Unit 4 schools: From right, Finley Tarr and David Wang of Franklin STEAM Academy and Heidy Fernandez of Edison. Provided

high school and then wonder why they are unprepared for the workforce. The same applies to helping students hone their soft skills since thinking critically and solving complex issues will be essential in their future careers.

So, how does the National Civics Bee work? To be eligible for the local competition, each student submitted an essay about a community issue, identified which civic principle it addressed and discussed how they would resolve it. After a distinguished panel of judges reviewed the essays, the top finalists were selected to advance to the local competition.

Locally, 15 finalists squared off during the in-person event at Parkland College. The competition featured two rounds of civics questions and a Q&A round centered on the essays of the five top-scoring participants — to further test their civics knowledge.

The bee tests students' civics knowledge through quizzes and questions while challenging their ability to articulate ideas and engage in constructive dialogue.

Champaign County's top three finalists, in order, were Finley Tarr and David Wang of Franklin STEAM Academy and Heidy Fernandez of Edison Middle School.

This year's judges were Stephanie Faraci, senior associate director at the University of Illinois' Technology Entrepreneur Center; Matthew Hurt, humanities professor at Parkland College; and Dalitso Sulamoyo, CEO of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission.

As the first-place winner, Tarr received a

\$500 cash prize and advances to the state competition, which the Illinois Chamber of Commerce will host. Wang and Fernandez will also move on to the state level as the second- and third-place finalists, respectively. The Illinois state finals are set for July 31 in Springfield.

At the state competition, winners will receive various prizes, and the top-scoring student will travel to Washington, D.C., to compete in the national championship in the fall. National prizes include \$15,000 for third place, \$25,000 for second and a grand prize of a \$100,000 529 college savings plan for first place.

The Champaign County Chamber of Commerce led the effort to bring in Illinois chambers as partners in this national competition because it is easy for students to receive false information and narratives in today's world of influencers, social media and artificial intelligence. We understand that it is more important than ever to expose students to the founding principles and accurate information through trusted materials.

Congratulations to all our student competitors. We look forward to growing this event for future generations. Now, how did you do with your civics test?

Answers: 1. B) A two-thirds majority vote in both the House and Senate;

2. C) John Adams

Laura Weis is president and CEO of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce. She can be reached at LauraW@champaigncounty.org.

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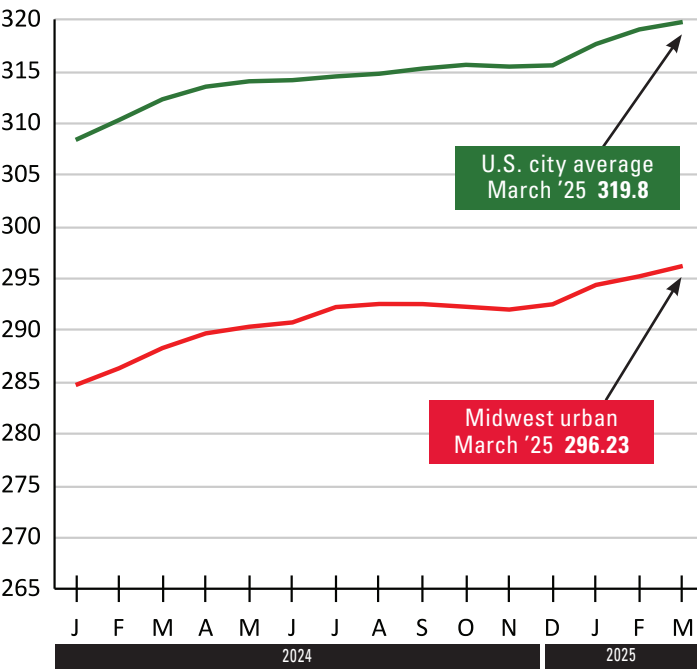
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INDICATORS

Consumer price index

The CPI measures average price changes of goods and services over time, with a reference base of 100 in 1982-84. To put that into context, a current CPI of 270.75 means a marketbasket of goods and services that cost \$100 in 1982-84 now costs \$270.75.



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Amtrak total monthly riders

	March 2025	Feb. 2025
Bloomington-Normal	20,708	16,445
Champaign-Urbana	23,672	17,819
Mattoon	2,902	2,241
Rantoul	415	367

Crop progress

Released April 14, 2025, by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), Agricultural Statistics Board, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Grain	April 13, 2025	2024
Fieldwork days	2.7 ▲	2.3
Illinois corn planted	1% ▼	3%
Illinois soybeans planted	2% ▼	4%
Winter wheat headed	1% ▼	5%

	VP	Poor	Fair	Good	Xlt
Winter wheat condition	—	1%	33%	57%	9%

Source: USDA

Hotel/motel statistics

Total amount of revenue generated in Champaign and Urbana by hotels and motels for room rentals only.

TOTAL REVENUE		
February '25	January '25	Change
\$338,997.10	\$281,293.39	▲ 20.51%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS		
2025	2024	Change
\$620,290.49	\$562,811.66	▲ 10.21%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of April 14, 2025.

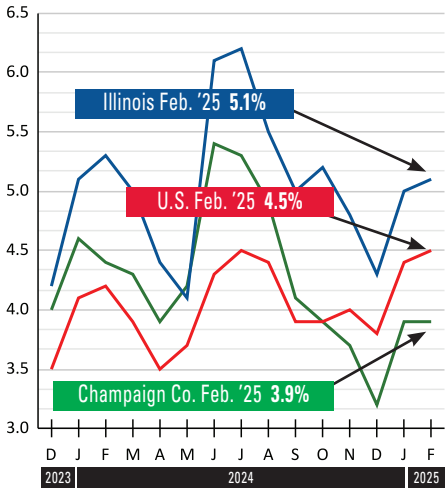
Area	April '25	April '24
Bloomington-Normal	\$3.32	\$3.83
Champaign-Urbana	\$3.33	\$3.70
Chicago	\$3.79	\$4.40
Danville	\$3.38	\$3.76
Decatur	\$3.31	\$3.66
Illinois	\$3.43	\$3.99
U.S.	\$3.18	\$3.63

Source: AAA

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	Feb. '25 (%)	Jan. '25 (%)	Feb. '24 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	107,108	4,149	3.9	3.9	4.6	= 0.0	▼ -0.7
Coles	23,455	860	3.7	3.8	4.2	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.5
Douglas	9,893	352	3.6	3.6	3.9	= 0.0	▼ -0.3
Edgar	7,826	329	4.2	4.4	4.6	▼ -0.2	▼ -0.4
Ford	6,502	281	4.3	4.9	4.5	▼ -0.6	▼ -0.2
Iroquois	11,701	646	5.5	5.8	6.1	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.6
Macon	43,404	2,550	5.9	6.0	6.4	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.5
McLean	94,078	3,578	3.8	4.0	4.0	▼ -0.2	▼ -0.2
Moultrie	6,775	241	3.6	3.7	4.1	▼ -0.1	▼ -0.5
Piatt	8,959	332	3.7	4.0	4.2	▼ -0.3	▼ -0.5
Vermilion	30,195	1,757	5.8	6.4	6.2	▼ -0.6	▼ -0.4
Region	349,896	15,075	4.4	4.6	4.8	▼ -0.2	▼ -0.4
State	6,564,677	334,691	5.1	5.0	5.3	▲ 0.1	▼ -0.2
U.S.	170,116,000	7,572,000	4.5	4.4	4.2	▲ 0.1	▲ 0.3

Source: Illinois Department of Employment Security, U.S. Department of Labor. Figures not seasonally adjusted.



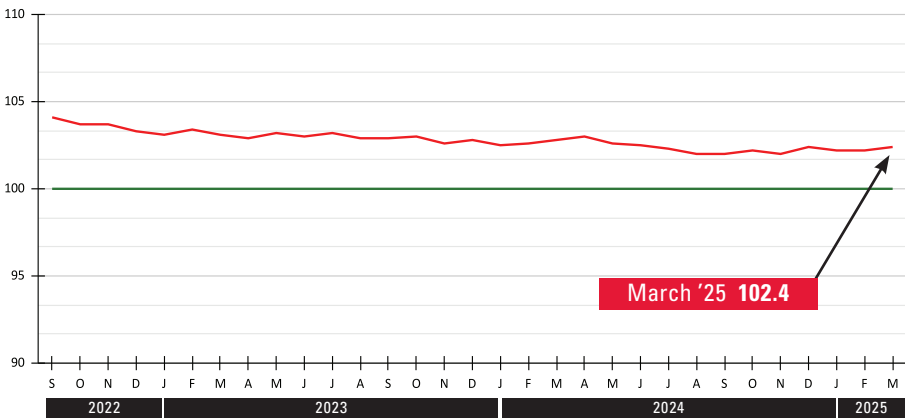
University of Illinois flash index

What is the flash index?

The flash index is an early indicator of the Illinois economy's expected performance. It is a weighted average of Illinois growth rates in corporate earnings, consumer spending and personal income.

An index above 100 indicates expected economic growth; an index below 100 indicates the economy is contracting.

Source: Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois



Champaign County retail sales collections

	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	Change ('19 vs. '24)
Champaign	\$23,761,243.84	\$22,423,142.90	\$21,941,280.97	\$21,169,808.79	\$16,177,806	\$17,255,397	▲ 37.7%
Mahomet	\$1,423,557.79	\$1,349,874.56	\$1,270,175.71	\$1,168,075.53	\$803,904	\$735,564	▲ 93.5%
Philo	\$159,392.79	\$168,537.50	\$165,797.37	\$150,664.38	\$110,493	\$105,128	▲ 51.6%
Rantoul	\$2,020,243.37	\$1,942,623.56	\$1,863,869.32	\$1,890,124.30	\$1,595,889	\$1,525,491	▲ 32.4%
Savoy	\$3,181,498.39	\$2,956,401.11	\$2,774,294.31	\$2,819,845.62	\$2,414,976	\$2,323,105	▲ 37.0%
St. Joseph	\$375,011.77	\$362,727.36	\$349,775.82	\$316,934.00	241,633	\$235,632	▲ 59.1%
Tolono	\$279,782.36	\$258,874.61	\$255,139.44	\$224,679.43	\$172,196	\$152,373	▲ 83.6%
Urbana	\$7,669,750.41	\$7,496,995.63	\$7,216,138.34	\$6,584,831.41	\$5,478,433	\$5,584,667	▲ 37.3%
Unincorporated	\$1,772,509.70	\$1,678,985.96	\$1,608,766.99	\$1,489,034.06	\$1,089,562	\$1,371,459	▲ 29.2%
County total	\$40,642,990.42	\$37,564,803.18	\$37,445,238.27	\$35,813,998	\$28,084,892	\$29,288,815	▲ 38.8%

Source: Latest statistics available from Illinois Department of Revenue

Home sales Total units sold, including condominiums, by most-recent quarter.

County	Median sales price								
	4Q 2024	4Q 2023	Pct. Change	2024	2023	Pct. Change	4Q 2024	4Q 2023	Pct. Change
Champaign	465	481	▼ -3.3%	2,122	2,216	▼ -4.2%	\$220,000	\$215,000	▲ 2.3%
Coles	120	135	▼ -11.1%	502	551	▼ -8.9%	\$123,000	\$125,000	▼ -1.6%
Douglas	30	24	▲ 25.0%	130	175	▼ -25.7%	\$175,750	\$139,500	▲ 26.0%
Edgar	43	37	▲ 16.2%	157	147	▲ 6.8%	\$92,000	\$67,700	▲ 35.9%
Ford	40	40	= 0.0%	180	156	▲ 15.4%	\$135,000	\$139,550	▼ -3.3%
Iroquois	57	53	▲ 7.5%	269	241	▲ 11.6%	\$132,500	\$104,900	▲ 26.3%
Macon	309	311	▼ -0.6%	1,312	1,270	▲ 3.3%	\$137,000	\$127,000	▲ 7.9%
McLean	514	478	▲ 7.5%	2,048	2,019	▲ 1.4%	\$239,450	\$220,500	▲ 8.6%
Moultrie	33	33	= 0.0%	90	113	▼ -20.4%	\$140,000	\$95,000	▲ 47.4%
Piatt	60	55	▲ 9.1%	220	203	▲ 8.4%	\$242,000	\$170,000	▲ 42.4%
Vermilion	159	163	▼ -2.5%	672	669	▲ 0.4%	\$115,000	\$101,750	▲ 13.0%
Illinois	31,325	29,954	▲ 4.6%	130,908	132,380	▼ -1.1%	\$285,000	\$260,000	▲ 9.6%

Source: Illinois Association of Realtors

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	Feb. '25	Feb. '24	Change
Enplanements	6,178	5,641	▲ 9.52%
YTD totals	Feb. '25	Feb. '24	Change
Enplanements	12,184	9,788	▲ 24.5%
Annual totals	2024	2023	Change
Enplanements	63,128	70,355	▼ 10.3%

Primary Mortgage Market Survey

Freddie Mac surveys lenders each week on the rates, fees and points for the most popular mortgage products. The following are the average rates for the week of April 10, 2025, for the U.S. and for the North Central region, which includes Illinois, and the average rates for the U.S. one year ago. The Primary Mortgage Market Survey no longer publishes fees/points or adjustable rates, as of Nov. 17, 2022.

Mortgage type	U.S. April '25	U.S. April '24
30-year fixed	6.62%	6.88%
15-year fixed	5.82%	6.16%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

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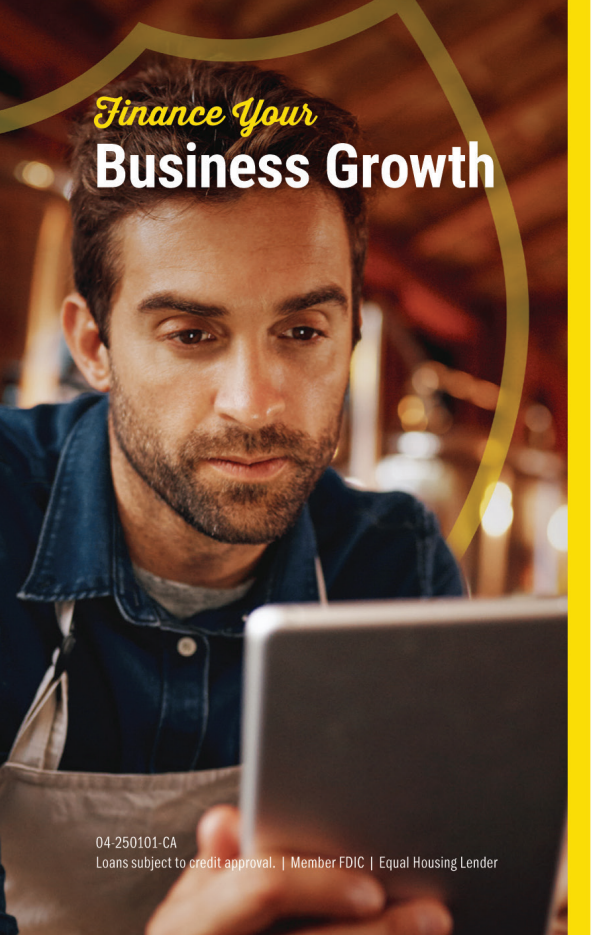
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Golden Nugget Danville

Backing up their bet



The Golden Nugget Danville opened its doors in May 2023 at 204 Eastgate Drive on the city's east side.

Going into its third year, casino shifting its focus to customer service, engagement

STORY Jennifer Bailey
PHOTOS Robin Scholz

DANVILLE

As the Golden Nugget Danville casino wraps up its second year of operation on the city's east side, officials are adjusting their priorities to focus on improving customer service as well as guest and community engagement, including another entertainment space.

General Manager Jahnae Erpenbach and the casino's senior leadership team say they want people to have a comfortable but exciting time.



Erpenbach says March was a very strong month, helped by a variety of sports events, including the NCAA tournament. The casino saw a total of 32,164 admissions, just below its monthly high of 33,018 set in December 2023, and set a record with \$3.95 million in total adjusted gross receipts. Since it opened in May 2023, the casino has seen more than 642,000 guests.

Erpenbach says she and her team remain optimistic at the conclusion of the first quarter of 2025.

“This is our year,” she says. “Last year was introspection and research and building. Now we’ve got to figure out how to get people what they want, and we have to make inroads in those relationships.”



Patrons try their hand at blackjack at in the casino's table-games area — a unique feature that sets it apart from bars and gambling cafés, which are only allowed to have a restricted number of video-gambling machines.



She says when the casino first opened, the focus was on fundamentals.

“Obviously, any new business, you’ve got to make sure you’re running smoothly, and you’re building a culture too,” Erpenbach says. “Trying to painstakingly make sure that we were, I think, looking at things in a constructive way, and ... from a marketing perspective, understanding our major players, getting to know the community, and getting their support and their backing, understanding our competition. There was a lot of that.”

Another component was building a strong team, she says.

“That was an undertaking too,” she says. “Bringing people from all over the country and trying to find them homes and making sure they felt settled in and they became part of the community. That was what we did in the first year, I think.”

The casino’s senior leaders recently participated in a three-day planning seminar at Danville Area Community College to look at where they want the casino to be and how the team, including some new members, can help them achieve those goals.

Business objectives

The new primary objectives include wanting the community to be proud of the casino, support it and feel like it’s their casino, Erpenbach says.

She says the casino has a lot of competition for gambling with so many video-gambling cafés nearby, and the recent opening of the Terre Haute Casino Resort only about an hour’s drive southeast in Indiana was something senior leadership had to “understand and learn through.”

“We need the community to say, ‘That place is great’ and ‘I want to bring my family, my friends when they come here because they take care of me’ and ‘I feel like I want them to succeed because I’m proud of them,’” Erpenbach says.

In order to do that, there has to be a feeling of trust, and “we have to walk the walk,” she says.

Erpenbach adds that while just about every bar and restaurant now has video-gambling terminals, the casino’s “sweet spot” is geographic areas where Golden Nugget is closer than another casino. She says Golden Nugget Danville has seen some healthy growth in visitors from the Crawfordsville and Lafayette, Ind., areas, as well as the western side of Indianapolis, but wants to get more from Champaign-Urbana.

“We’ve got to figure out how to grow that area,” she says. “We need to penetrate Champaign more greatly.”

The casino’s advertising efforts include direct mail, digital, radio and print, and billboards.

Another major objective for the casino, Erpenbach says, is a new guest-engagement program set to launch in May.

“It’s not just (employees) giving a friendly ‘Hi, how can I help you,’” she says. “It’s an intensely trained program where every one of our team members is trained to appropriately engage, to use personalized information always, always try to find out what is it the customer really needs in this moment, and have I done it? And asking those questions so you never leave an engagement without fully satisfying what needs to be done, whether it’s a compromise or an actual resolution. So, guest engagement is critical.”

The casino has anywhere from 200 to 240 employees, and through its Community Ties program, its leaders are joining and serving on the boards of community organizations.

It also launched “Give \$10, Get \$10” program where guests donate to charitable organizations in exchange for slot play.

New products and services also are

important, Erpenbach says.

“How we compete with the video-gaming terminals is to have a one-stop place where people can have just a gambit of entertainment options,” she says. “So here, we have table games, we have bigger limits, we have more comprehensive food and beverage, we have us (senior leaders).

“We have so many more things to make things exciting and fun,” she adds. “More space, ability to create promotions, more entertainment options. We’re a one-stop shop. We are the casino.”

Erpenbach says the casino is seeing a lot more play at its table games. Michael Holmes, who oversees that area, says the casino got a lot of requests for craps and now has those tables, which require more staff than blackjack, open four days a week.

For slots, Erpenbach says, the casino wants to make sure its machines are all working, so repair and maintenance are

critical. She says getting new products changes things up, too, but takes time.

Erpenbach says senior leaders want make sure they market the casino successfully and give people an opportunity to have anything they might want, but one limitation is the property’s current footprint.

“So, we have to make sure our food-and-beverages elements are spot on (and our people are spot on,” she says.

For example, officials would like to bring in new games to have slot tournaments and are working on a whole new section of tournament games to make that fun and exciting, she says.

There is also a plan to use the Front Row Bar and Grill for more events, as well as create a semi-enclosed or even temporarily enclosed facility for private events and entertainment, such as a magician or comedian or tribute band, to make it more of an entertainment option on the casino floor, she says.



Golden Nugget Danville General Manager Jahnae Erpenbach, seated third from left, is shown with her senior leadership team.

And she and her team are always working on food and beverages, she adds.

Erpenbach says Chef Raul Quevedo is an artist and makes the food taste and look good.

Quevedo, a native of San Diego who spent the last 10 years in New York, says he has been doing a little bit of everything and most recently worked at hotels and microbreweries.

He’s been in Danville a year and is working at a casino for the first time, and says at the end of the day, he can cook anywhere with the equipment, dishes and fire.

Quevedo says the demographics are meat and potatoes, and he tries to give people what they want while slowly introducing new things.

“It’s just really simple foundations of really good cooking,” he says.

He says he always encourages feedback on the food at Saltgrass Steak House and Front Row Bar and Grill, as it allows them to get better and grow.

Saltgrass is a franchise and the

flagship for the Golden Nugget and its parent company, Landry’s Inc.

It features different monthly and happy-hour specials, and dishes are added to fit in with the brand. Front Row currently features free pizza on Thursdays.

Quevedo says when people give the casino a chance, they find out they can relax in a fun environment where they can get good food.

“Whether you’re winning or losing, it’s a good place to just enjoy a good time,” Quevedo says. “When people realize that part, it’s when they say, ‘OK, this is where I want to be.’ Winning kind of adds more to that.”

He says people are also realizing the casino is not there just to take their money, but is part of the community, and at the end of the day, it’s a good place to have fun.

Future plans

As for the future, Erpenbach says she wants to create a private space at Front

Row, which has seen a lot more parties and events with people feeling more engaged while being on the casino floor.

She says she’d like to do more of that, but also close it up, sell some tickets and have two or three shows a night for entertainment options.

“We need those extra products and services to differentiate ourselves,” she says.

In terms of a sports book, Erpenbach says she anticipates that coming in 2026 but will have more information after DraftKings renegotiates its agreement with the state. In addition, a hotel still remains part of future plans.

“You budget, and then you see how you do and keep working toward what you think you need, and then you re-evaluate and you look at your cost structure and you re-evaluate that, and then you look at your margins and you want them to be healthy, and then your responsibility to your banks and your investors and your people and your community,” Erpenbach explains.



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The casino's food-and-beverage options include Saltgrass Steak House, the flagship chain of parent company Landry's Inc., and Front Row Bar and Grill, which currently offers free pizza on Thursdays.

She says the casino is very committed to the community, giving quite a bit of money back each quarter to several entities as part of its host agreement, and there are plans to grow that.

She says as part of that process, the goal is to get as much capital and cash flow as possible and put it toward new investment.

This year, she says, the push is for promotional kiosks and tournament games and a way to have a venue on the casino floor, which will hopefully generate more cash flow that will give the casino a bigger advantage over competitors and help it take the next step of a hotel.

That poses its own set of questions,

Erpenbach says, such as how many rooms it should have, whether it should be attached to the casino — and if so, where — and does it need a spa and another restaurant or a food court?

"It's best that we're strategic," she says. "It's best that we're spending this time understanding what's the best way to attack this."

Community feedback has been wonderful, employees say.

Information Technology Director Kurt Harvey says when he's out in the community wearing his Golden Nugget shirt, he usually hears, "I love that place. Do you work there?"

Other employees say they get similar questions and also hear from people

who say they've not yet been.

"It's up to us to reach out and bring folks in," Erpenbach says.

David Brown, director of casino services, says several employees recently volunteered at the NJCAA basketball tournament at Danville Area Community College, and found that people were still curious about the casino.

Amanda McCoy, director of human resources, says she's heard comparisons to the Terre Haute casino, with people saying Golden Nugget Danville's customer service is better.

"Which is really great for our team to have pulled that, being a smaller casino," she says. "It always makes me excited when someone says that." ✂



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State Farm Center

Concerted effort



Champaign arena has a sound plan to engage community through experiences, partnerships

STORY Luke Taylor PHOTOS Provided

CHAMPAIGN the past few years.

No matter if they win at the buzzer or lose by double digits, State Farm Center has been stuffed most times Brad Underwood's Illini have taken the court

The arena's hope is to create that same level of consistent buzz around the community when a national act is booked for a concert, be it rock or country, Christian or Motown.



"The support of the community is what will create 'downhill' momentum and allow us to continue building on past successes," arena Assistant Director Brad Swanson said.

One way State Farm Center officials hope to achieve that is by building relationships with local businesses and individuals, much the same way that the UI's Division of Intercollegiate Athletics does with donors.

That could mean a company reserving a State Farm Center suite for shows while also advertising its business. Or, it could be a full-fledged partnership, like the one between State Farm Center and The News-Gazette's parent company, Central Illinois Multimedia Group.

In recent weeks, the arena and CIMG announced they'd joined forces to promote a series of shows spanning a wide range of musical genres — country (Lonestar on May 4), Motown (The Temptations and Four Tops on Oct. 16) and the biggie, rock and roll (June 14's REO Speedwagon reunion show).

"It's just kind of looking at things in a new way and looking at it more from a long-term perspective, rather than just on an event-by-event basis," arena Director John Marquardt said.

Said CIMG Chief Operating Officer Paul Barrett: "For us, partnering with John and the folks at State Farm Center is a natural progression in the longstanding relationship between the U of I and The News-Gazette and our parent company, CIMG.

"This remarkable facility is a focal point of our community, and as John has said, this relationship is about long-term community enhancement by two of the oldest and most influential institutions in the Champaign-Urbana area: the University of Illinois and The News-Gazette and its media subsidiaries.

"Just like our relationship with Learfield and the U of I with regard to sports broadcasting and promotion, this event/entertainment partnership is a marriage made in heaven."

The arena's pitch isn't so much that people should come to concerts they aren't interested in. Rather, it's to encourage community members to look at shows as an option for an activity to do with friends or a chance to hear something new.

It's also to encourage people to view attending a concert as an investment in the venue's efforts to bring in more acts over time.

'Year-round conversation'

State Farm Center makes a large financial commitment any time a concert is added to the schedule, creating a risky scenario if the local fan base isn't as large as expected.

That doesn't even take into account the process of building relationships with agents or promoters.

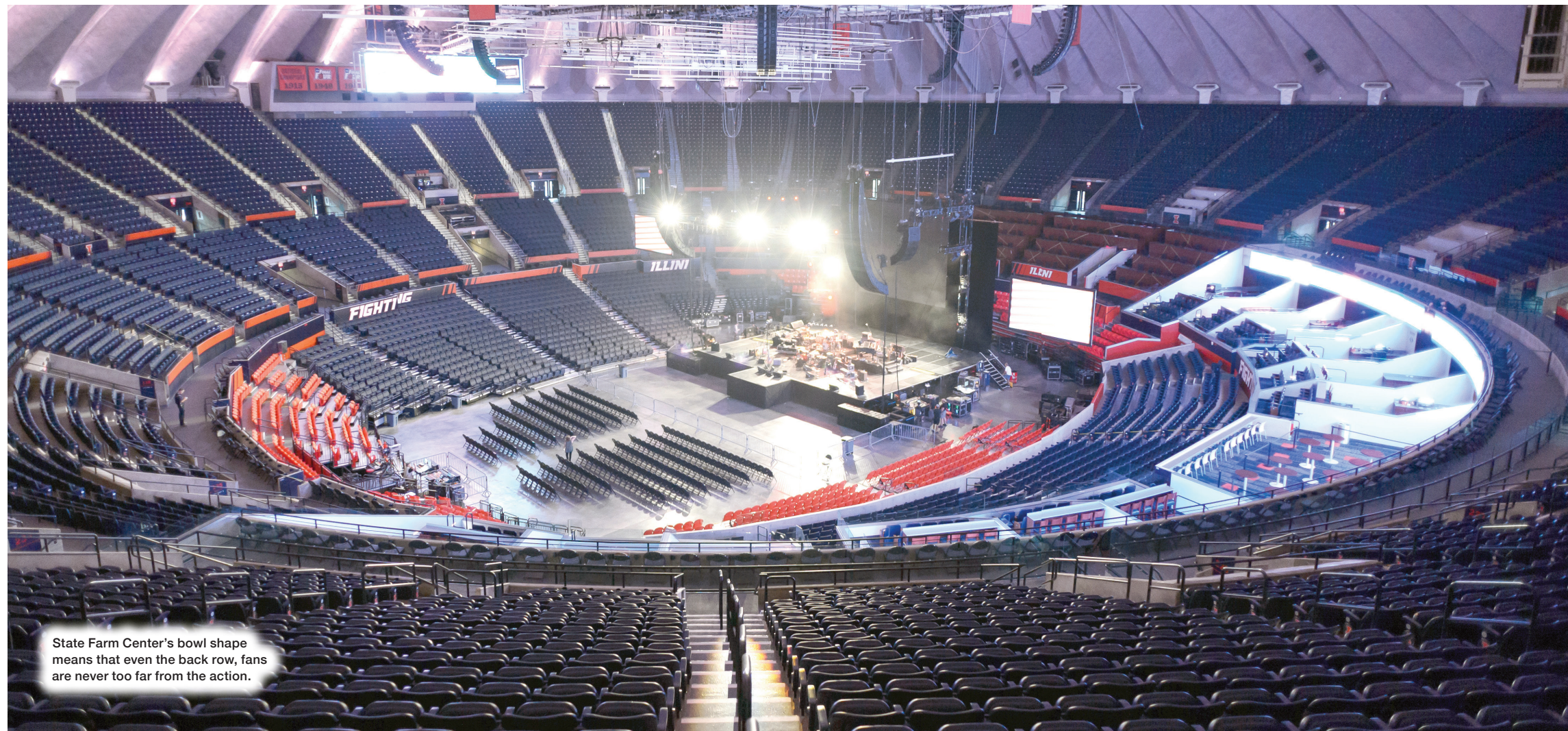
Marquardt is in charge of booking for the arena.

"It's a year-round conversation that takes place. We have relationships with promoters that we've been doing business with for decades," he said. "When they have a tour that's crossing the country and it might intersect with Champaign, they know to call me and we'll try to work out the details."

But he can't just wait for promoters to come to him; arena employees also spend time reaching out to promoters for different acts that they would like to bring to town.

Marquardt said one goal is to bring in a wide variety of acts and entertainment, including non-concert events like touring Broadway shows, to appeal to the diverse tastes of Champaign-Urbana and surrounding counties.

"Our bread and butter could truly just be country show after country show, but that doesn't serve the purpose of the building to the community," Swanson said.



State Farm Center's bowl shape means that even the back row, fans are never too far from the action.

Added Barrett: “Brad and John are absolutely correct that this wonderful facility should be for everyone to enjoy. Like many of the amenities around us in our community, sometimes we take for granted things that others living outside our region covet. By opening our minds and our pocketbooks, we can continue to create wonderful memories.”

That purpose is core to State Farm Center because it's a nonprofit unit of the University of Illinois, not a solely revenue-driven operation like many venues.

“We have to charge for parking and concessions and other things to create the revenue streams that allow us to bring events to this facility. The costs of turning the lights on, staffing the venue and booking performers the community wants to see all add up quickly,” Marquardt said. “At the end of the day, we're not out to

make a profit like a lot of other buildings like ours.”

One challenge in bringing in larger musical acts is C-U's placement near big markets like Chicago, Indianapolis and St. Louis, plus more midsize competitors like Bloomington, Peoria, Decatur and Terre Haute, Ind.

And, Marquardt said, the current trend is for artists to opt for large markets with guaranteed sold-out shows over areas where selling the last couple thousand seats might take a lot of extra work.

“We're one of many smaller stops in between major markets in an industry that is highlighting primarily major markets,” Marquardt said. “As that piece of the pie that's available to secondary and tertiary markets like ours shrinks, we need to try to do more to give ourselves the best shot at landing those shows.”

Another major challenge in bringing in more acts isn't unique to State Farm Center: finding a time for a show that works for both the artist and the venue.

In State Farm Center's case, Illini men's and women's basketball can fill up days that would otherwise be ideal for concerts. The venue also hosts other events, ranging from IHSA sports finals to the Illinois Junior Academy of Science's annual exposition.

“Those are all things that are not huge concerts, but they require just as much advanced planning to weave those events into our already-aggressive entertainment calendar,” Marquardt said. “Those timelines are all set months, if not years, in advance.”

Concerts take a while to organize, too: It took around three years to arrange for the 2017 Garth Brooks concerts that ultimately sold 56,000-plus tickets.

'More of a destination'

It's up to the venue to market itself — not just to ticket-buyers but also to acts it hopes to lure to Champaign. The arena's renovations in 2016 made it a much easier sell.

Marquardt said that work changed “everything.” At 50 years old, the building didn't have air conditioning and only had one set of loading docks for shows, and it took up to a minute for the lights to turn on.

The renovations solved those issues, refreshed the backstage areas and added a whole kitchen and more points of sale, which introduced the ability to sell alcoholic beverages, as well as more food options.

Wider concourses made it easier for fans to get around, and new lobby areas added a level of security.

“It made us a more modern facility that became more of a destination for the guests,” Marquardt said.

The new sound system is too loud for some, but that means it's flexible and customizable to an artist's preferences.

The lights are new too, including elements that add color to the exterior or shine up toward the ceiling inside the seating bowl, accentuating part of the iconic architecture of the venue.

All of that can be useful for musical acts and theater productions, which no longer have to rent as much equipment to perform at State Farm Center.

The design of the building itself — a huge, circular arena that looks like some sort of flying saucer on the prairie — has some unique selling points for fans and artists, too.

Swanson said it can be difficult to sell out the back row, which is troubling since it includes more than 1,000 of the 15,500 permanent seats, but those seats are much closer to the stage than in many venues of that size.

“If you're in our last row, that's equivalent to a club seat in a lot of big venues when comparing how far you are from the stage, how high you are off the ground, and how steep the seats are,” he said.

'Accessible pricing'

More major changes from the 2016 renovations included the addition of suites and club spaces.

The suites are unique compared to other venues because they're open-air and close to the action.

Both suites and club spaces have played a role in building the experience for sports fans.

“Those are sold by our athletic development staff that cultivate relationships with donors,” Marquardt said. “That's a long-term relationship that exists with the donors who buy tickets.”

Suites offer private spaces for large groups with included kitchen spaces and access to the Traditions Club.

Club seats are season tickets that include access to one of four clubs that each offer different amenities like additional food options and courtside seating.

That kind of specialized experience is soon going to be enhanced further for concerts.

Marquardt said the idea is to open up avenues for more repeat business and relationships with companies and individuals that will not be one-time purchases like a typical concert-ticket sale.



ABOVE: Club membership grants access to one of three spaces with special concessions options and other perks. BELOW: Arena Director John Marquardt wants to cater to a wide range of audiences: ‘We want to have big acts here, but we also don't want price to be a reason that somebody can't attend a show here.’



New offerings for businesses will include packages to reserve a suite or club space for a concert, but also to advertise in the venue on the night of the show and on other platforms.

Of course, Marquardt said that businesses aren't his only priority in bringing in greater audiences for concert events.

"Something that's a priority for me is making sure that we have accessible pricing for fans of all different means and backgrounds," he said. "We want to have big acts here, but we also don't want price to be a reason that somebody can't attend a show here."

'Afternoon-out kind of thing'

Illinois-based concert promoter Ditto Basso believes the State Farm Center-CIMG partnership is a surefire winner: "The music concert business has changed dramatically since COVID. After many months off, all the major bands hit the road with their touring schedule," he said.

"Everyone is in competition to bring the major acts to their communities. This is why it makes such sound sense for State Farm Center and Central Illinois Multimedia Group to combine their resources and bring A-list bands back to Champaign. State Farm Center has a legendary facility and will continue to work to bring world-class entertainment back to Champaign."

Despite challenges with scheduling and competition with larger markets, Marquardt said State Farm Center is dedicated to using its resources, including in new unique ways, to create



offerings for the local community.

That might include college students who can walk over to the arena or someone from Rantoul who shouldn't have to drive to Chicago to see a show they're interested in.

To continue increasing offerings and bringing in bigger acts, he's hoping to move forward a conversation with that community about turning out for different shows.

For example, State Farm Center has an upcoming Sunday-afternoon concert featuring the country band Lonestar, an example of an "outside the box" approach to try to engage the community in a different way, rather than just a offering a show at a typical time for a country music show.

The idea for that show is to position it as a "Sunday Funday," where groups of friends can come experience a show on a Sunday afternoon, support a charitable cause and still be home in time for dinner.

"It's an afternoon-out kind of thing," Marquardt said. "That's a great example of the concept of creating the experience, and not necessarily going to see the artist, but creating an afternoon-entertainment experience that people can get behind."

Arena officials said they'd also be interested in booking

local acts to open shows when possible — like next month, when the Feudin' Hillbillies will take the stage before Lonestar — as another way to connect with the community.

"When we talk about our role as a community destination, that's something that I take pretty seriously, and I know our whole team here is on board with that," Marquardt said. "We want everybody to be able to come and enjoy events here,

not just the people that want to buy the suite for the biggest concert or biggest basketball game of the year, but people that just want to come see a comedy show or want to see the Marching Illini in concert."

Added Barrett: "This an exciting new time for State Farm Center, The News-Gazette and the citizens of our community. The collaboration will bring diverse shows and entertainment for all to enjoy. Sunday Funday will become a family commitment on refrigerator doors all over the region.

"With the marketing, digital and advertising reach of CIMG and the professional expertise of John and his crew at State Farm Center, the quality of life for our community will only continue to improve." ✂

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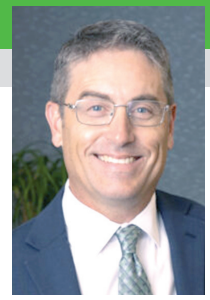
IN PICTURES



ABOVE: News-Gazette 2024 Farm Leader of the Year Larry Dallas talks with an attendee at the banquet in his honor.
BELOW: Inaugural Emerging Farm Leader of the Year winner Olivia Shrike speaks with 2022 Farm Leader of the Year Russell Buhr at the event.



Difference-makers in the area agricultural community gathered at Riggs Beer Co. on March 31 in Urbana for The News-Gazette's annual Farm Leader of the Year banquet, where they celebrated the 2024 honoree, Larry Dallas of Tuscola, and the inaugural winner of the new Emerging Farm Leader of the Year award, Olivia Shrike, 18, of Sadorus.



By MIKE MARRON
CIB contributor

Four areas to work on

Those who follow me or Vermilion Advantage on social media know two things about me that are undeniable. First, I am a passionate advocate for Vermilion County, my home. Second, I tend to wear my feelings on my sleeve, and I get worked up from time to time.

Recently, after a particularly challenging week, I let my frustrations show on a Facebook video outlining some of the problems we face in Vermilion County. I got a little blowback, but I don't regret doing it. No one disagreed with anything I said, but they got a little nervous drawing attention to issues we need resolved. I understand the risk I'm taking here; after all, my No. 1 job is promoting the greatest place on Earth, Vermilion County.

In response, I would say a couple of things. First, we will never progress as a community unless we are honest about the issues we face and are willing to solve them. We can only be truly proficient at selling the greatness of Vermilion County if we are dedicated to fixing these issues. Every county, no matter how prosperous, has issues it needs to address. The successful ones are those willing to tackle them head on. It is OK to admit that we aren't where we want to be, but there is no excuse for not heading in the right direction.

Secondly, in this digital age, we aren't fooling anyone by staying quiet. Our digital reputation exists whether we like it or not and whether that judgement is fair or not. Ignoring or denying the issues we need to fix hurts our credibility, and staying quiet lets everyone else define us, instead of us proactively defining ourselves. Leveling with the rest of the world gives us credibility and shows that we are serious about making our county even better than it already is.

To me, that commitment to self-improvement is something that is attractive to the rest of the world. We should wear it like a badge of honor.

Vermilion County is the greatest place on Earth, but we do still have work to do if we want to build the Vermilion County of our future. Here's four places we can work on:

1. The county needs a face-lift.

Blight is an issue here, as it is in every county in downstate Illinois. Blight is a result of many things but has been fueled

by population declines and a lack of new housing stock for decades.

The city of Danville has made great strides in tackling this problem over recent years, but there is more to do. Vermilion Advantage is working with the county board to implement a blight-reduction program for communities outside Danville. We must be committed to permanently solving this problem. That will take resources, but it is an investment that will immediately offer a return to the taxpayers as property values will increase and it will create an enticement for investment.

When any local government in our county is looking at how to invest its limited resources, I would argue that blight removal belongs at the top of the list of priorities. Investing in efforts like blight removal or infrastructure upgrades are far more important than adding the amenities we all would like in our communities. Build the foundation by making these investments, and the amenities will come later.

2. The county must do a better job of marketing itself.

As I mentioned earlier, if you aren't telling your story, then someone else is, and you are at their mercy. It isn't a hard to figure out how to solve the marketing issue. Examples of great marketing campaigns are everywhere. Once again, the ability to solve this problem for Vermilion County exists, but we must be willing to do what we need to do to solve it. That means a couple things.

First, all stakeholders in the community must come together in a coordinated effort. Everyone must be on the same page, speaking with the same voice. The only thing worse than no marketing campaign is multiple campaigns. Secondly, we must be committed to making the investment it will take to make this work. Once again, this issue will require resources, and once again, if it is an effective effort, it will immediately pay a strong return on the taxpayer investment by attracting new people to our county.

3. It is imperative that we build the best, most business-friendly environment in the county and Danville that we can.

Once again, this isn't complicated, and there are multiple examples of communities that are really successful that we could emulate. Everyone reasonable agrees that there must be regulations and rules. Things

must be built to a standard that ensures safety, fits in with the development plans of the municipality, and is aesthetically pleasing and beneficial to the community. It is crucial, however, that those rules are fair, consistent and evenly applied. It is also helpful when the entities responsible for enforcing those regulations have the attitude that their job is to help businesses comply so they can be open and succeed in the community. All of these things are attainable.

4. Vermilion Advantage is committed to telling our story in the halls of power, both in Springfield and Washington D.C.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and we intend to squeak as loud as we need to. When I was in the Legislature, I was always impressed with the Champaign County First group. It was made up of a very diverse group of leaders from around Champaign County who represented a variety of groups and organizations that weren't always aligned politically, but they were there together speaking united on a list of priorities for Champaign County.

During my time in Springfield, that group was successful getting multiple high-profile and expensive projects funded, and I am convinced it is because they showed up repeatedly advocating for their priorities. There is no reason why Vermilion County shouldn't be doing the same thing, and as long as I am at the helm of Vermilion Advantage, we will have a presence in Springfield and Washington, D.C.

Vermilion County is the greatest place on Earth. If you aren't here, you are missing out. I will argue that point with anyone who feels different, and I promise you that I will win because I passionately believe in my home. That doesn't mean that we don't have work to do, though.

It is time to be honest with ourselves about what we face and how the rest of the world views us. It is time to roll up our sleeves and to get to work, to put our money where our mouth is, and build the greatest place on Earth for the future. ✂

Mike Marron is president and CEO of Vermilion Advantage and served as representative for the 104th Illinois House District from 2018 to 2023.

Humane society seeks 'Seniors for Seniors'

By MARY TIEFENBRUNN

The Champaign County Humane Society has operated an animal shelter and pet-adoption program for 70 years. It accepts dogs, cats and small-animal pets of all ages.

At the shelter, the animals receive all the necessities — food, water, and shelter — plus veterinary care, TLC from staff and volunteers, and most importantly, the chance for a new loving home through the Society's pet-adoption program.

The humane society offers our community a variety of programs that support responsible pet ownership and promote the benefits of the human-animal bond. For example, a dedicated staff member takes calls from adopters and pet owners needing help with animal training and behavior; dog-training and puppy-socialization classes are offered year-round to give owners the skills required to raise well-mannered and well-adjusted dogs; humane investigators respond to calls about animal neglect or abuse in the community; and a humane educator takes animals on monthly visits to senior-living facilities.

The humane society also has a "Seniors for Seniors" program, through which qualified applicants, age 60 and older, can adopt a cat or dog that is 10 years or older, with no adoption fee. The program provides a win-win for pets that are often overlooked by adopters seeking puppies or kittens and seniors who lack the tolerance for the chaos of raising young pets.

For older animals, living with an older adult who has ample time for daily interaction is the perfect "retirement." Older dogs and cats really enjoy a quiet lifestyle and lots of lap time. Win!

Pets can provide a form of social contact for anyone. Many older adults find their social world shrinking as they age, and studies have shown that the companionship of a dog or cat can provide them with comfort, a sense of purpose and a reason to stay active and engaged.

Companion animals can also improve physical and mental health. By adopting a new "best friend," studies have shown that you might experience the benefits of decreased heart rate and blood pressure. Win!

Cats can be loving companions to many older adults. Older cats, in particular, are happy to spend their days indoors, proving comfort and affection to their humans. They can be an excellent choice for individuals with mobility limitations.

Dogs, on the other hand, motivate their owners to engage in regular physical activity, which is extremely important to maintaining health in the later years. Whether playing fetch, going on a walk or spending time in the yard, dogs force us to stay active. Many older owners also find that walking the dog keeps them engaged with their neighbors. Thus, dogs are



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Feline residents are shown in April 2023 at the Champaign County Humane Society's new facility on the western edge of Champaign.

great companions for those who need a little nudge to remain physically and socially engaged.

Some older adults are hesitant to get a pet because they are concerned their pet might outlive them and they worry about what would happen. The humane society hates to see this be a barrier to adoption when they have so many gentle adult cats in the shelter just waiting for a lap to sit on! If this is a concern of yours, the society offers several tips to ease your mind.

While you are still healthy, identify a friend or family member who is willing and able to take responsibility for your animal after your death. If there is nobody who can promise to become your pet's new owner, perhaps a friend or family member will at least agree to take care of your pet's immediate needs upon your death or hospitalization, and then will find a suitable home for your pet, or take them to an animal shelter with a good reputation and adoption program.

You can also leave arrangements for your pets in your estate-planning documents. Illinois allows you to create a "pet trust" that provides directives and financial support for your pets after you are gone.

As a nonprofit, the Champaign County Humane Society relies on the support of volunteers and donors to achieve its mission. Retired adults represent a significant portion of the volunteers and donors at the society! Whether walking dogs, cleaning cages or helping with animal socialization, volunteers are instrumental to the mission of the humane society.

While the society's mission is to support the needs of the animals in our community, it also has programs and opportunities for you. Pets can bring a great deal of love and joy to your life, and you can do the same for them. Whether you are looking for a new furry friend or a way to give back to your community, consider the humane society. ✕

Mary Tiefenbrunn is executive director of the Champaign County Humane Society.

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Johnette Mitchell

*VP, Treasury Management
Relationship Manager*

455 N. Main Street
Decatur

217-373-2136

jmitchell@firstmid.com



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